

Court program helps veterans get back on their feet

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The court system hopes to help veterans get back on their feet with a new program that connects them with medical resources and works to reduce their chances of winding up in jail.

The Veterans Court kicked off last week in Phoenix with its first calendar of cases. It is run out of Maricopa County Superior Court and joins the ranks of similar programs across the country.

"We have men and women who have served in the armed forces who have come back and, a lot of times, have been damaged by their experience," said Douglas Rayes, presiding judge of Maricopa County's criminal court. "When they come back into the civilian world, they have difficulty adjusting and coping. A lot of them have had very, very difficult experiences that probably no one is able to understand."

Rayes and Commissioner Michael Hintze are overseeing the program. Hintze ran the calendar last week, hearing a series of cases involving probation issues.

He made the court's policy clear: It's there to connect veterans to resources but not to coddle them. He told several veterans he expected them to meet their obligations and stay on good terms with the court system. He also made it clear that there are less-enjoyable alternatives for those who don't.

Hintze said the goal of the court is to "better protect the community and honor veterans' service."

Court officials said that, in many cases, specialized services and treatment are available from the federal Department of Veterans Affairs. The problem, they said, is that veterans don't know about the services or don't use them.

Penny Miller, justice outreach specialist for the VA in Phoenix, said some veterans mistakenly think they don't qualify for benefits if they haven't been in combat. "A lot of veterans don't recognize themselves as veterans," she said.

Miller was a representative of one of several agencies participating in the program, which includes health services, legal advice and court representatives.

The first phase of the program will concentrate on veterans who haven't been meeting with probation officers as required or those at risk of violating the terms of their probation, Rayes said.

Michael Leon, coordinator of the Phoenix VA's health-care program for the homeless, said it can be difficult for someone serving overseas to adjust to life back home. He said something as simple as a freeway traffic jam can cause distress to a soldier who has been patrolling areas where roadside bombs are a threat and moving forward is all-important.

Leon said the court puts the veterans in touch with services they wouldn't get in the typical justice system.

"It's about a collaborative effort to provide services to help these vets stabilize," he said. "Many of them need to decompress and gather themselves."

